

## How We Live Now:

### **Has the age of social media made us incapable of forming and maintaining intimacy in our relationships?**

Lori H. Gordon states that “it is one of the ironies of modern life that many couples today are living together as complete strangers”.<sup>1</sup> It is an interesting observation that mentally, we are further apart than ever, when we have never before had such an “overwhelming access to other humans from all across the world,”<sup>2</sup> built on “boundless relationship[s] and an endless stream of virtuality [...] untethered from the confines of analogue space.”<sup>3</sup> Some say that the rise in social media means that we are losing ourselves in our smart phones; that social networking sites have robbed the intimacy from our relationships<sup>4</sup> and turned us into thoughtless beings, unable to communicate our innermost thoughts and feelings.<sup>5</sup> But is this true? Are the people of today lacking in their ability to be intimate, or do we simply need to redefine the term to fit our contemporary society? In this reflective essay I will explore the concept of intimacy, and look at whether it is possible to be intimate on social media, and how social media affects our intimate relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Lori H. Gordon, “Intimacy: The Art of Relationships – How relationships are sabotaged by hidden expectations”, Psychology Today, Published 31 December 1969, Reviewed 9 June 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/196912/intimacy-the-art-relationships>, [Accessed 26 march 2018]

<sup>2</sup> “Love in the Age of Social Media – How Being Connected is Changing the Game”, MoveMeQuotes, Date of Publication not Available, <http://www.movemequotes.com/love-in-the-age-of-social-media/>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>3</sup> Avery H Richards, “Intimacy in the Age of Virtuality”, Medium Psych, 2 January 2018, [https://medium.com/@averyhastings\\_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1](https://medium.com/@averyhastings_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1) [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>4</sup> Lori H. Gordon, “Intimacy: The Art of Relationships – How relationships are sabotaged by hidden expectations”, Psychology Today, Published 31 December 1969, Reviewed 9 June 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/196912/intimacy-the-art-relationships>, [Accessed 26 march 2018].

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Tendler, “The Disconnect – How Social Media is making us Anti-Social”, The Odyssey Online, 15 September 2015, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/disconnect-social-media-making-anti-social>, [Accessed 20 April 2018]

There are many ways to define intimacy. Gordon calls it a “deep biological need”<sup>6</sup> while Christina Miguel Martos defines it as a “closeness of knowing, of being attached to another person”<sup>7</sup>,

*the inner thoughts and feelings, which one only shares within meaningful relationships (couple, parental, friendship or sexual) which are based in love, liking or caring. Intimacy practices are the acts of sharing our inner thoughts and feelings with our significant other.*<sup>8</sup>

This shows us that there are many types of intimacy, and interestingly, none of the definitions I have found state that you need to be physically close<sup>9</sup>, as the feeling of intimacy is built on sharing thoughts, fears and inner feelings. Also, even though a lot of research about contemporary intimacy has been centred on the sexual kind,<sup>10</sup> I wish to focus this essay on familial intimacy and intimacy between partners. Observations of different types of intimacy

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<sup>6</sup> Lori H. Gordon, “Intimacy: The Art of Relationships – How relationships are sabotaged by hidden expectations”, Psychology Today, Published 31 December 1969, Reviewed 9 June 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/196912/intimacy-the-art-relationships>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>7</sup> Christina Miguel Martos, “The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites”, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Things that are said or done only by people who have a close relationship with each other.” - “Definition of Intimacy”, Cambridge Online Dictionary, Date of Publication not Available, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/intimacy> [Accessed 26 March 2018]  
“Something of a personal or private nature” – “Definition of Intimacy”, Merriam-Webster Dictionaries, Date of Publication not Available, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intimacy> [Accessed 16 May 2018]

<sup>10</sup> Lori H. Gordon, “Intimacy: The Art of Relationships – How relationships are sabotaged by hidden expectations”, Psychology Today, Published 31 December 1969, Reviewed 9 June 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/196912/intimacy-the-art-relationships>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

lets us see how “nowadays, [it] is an important aspect of defining who we are and therefore it is publicly exhibited as an ingredient of social identity.”<sup>11</sup>

For the sake of this essay, I want to split social media and networking sites into two categories; public and private. The public category includes channels such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, where one individual’s activity appears in another individual’s “feed”.<sup>12</sup> The main purpose of content on these sites is for the user to gain “likes” and “followers”, not fostering a good environment for honest and vulnerable intimacy. On the other hand, we have to look at “private” social media (which is in itself an oxymoron, as nothing is ever truly private online<sup>13</sup>); sites such as Skype, Facebook Messenger and FaceTime, where communication is happening in closed channels between two users, without sending updates to the rest of the network. These channels are where private and intimate conversations might take place. I also want to split intimacy into analogue physical intimacy, and virtual online intimacy.

Here is where our observations of intimacy in the age of social media begin. As we have already established that intimacy is about sharing thoughts and fears, it should in theory be obtainable on social media, as its sole purpose is to share thoughts and feelings. Intimacy

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<sup>11</sup> Christina Miguel Martos, “The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites”, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>12</sup> The feed of a social media platform is the main page of the platform, where all activities are gathered and where a user can see other users’ updates. They are constantly refreshed and updated to give the user the most relevant content.

<sup>13</sup> “Chapter 2: Nothing is Private”, Digital Citizenship, Providence Day School Digital Compass, Day of Publication not Available, <https://pdsdigitalcitizenship.org/chapter-2-nothing-is-private/> [Accessed 24 April 2018]

has become something we can share without being afraid of who sees it,<sup>14</sup> where it may once have been a secret thing shared only between two people.

Issues occur, however, when we attempt to be intimate on public social media channels, as Martes states that “whenever intimacy is made public, it ceases being intimacy [...] when advertised.”<sup>15</sup> Smaller Facebook groups and private Instagram accounts that only make information available to a seemingly small number of users, may feel like an intimate connection.<sup>16</sup> However, when we use these public social media channels to substitute our private conversations and intimate moments, we may be inclined to fool ourselves into believing that what we are experiencing is intimacy<sup>17</sup> when in reality, what we feel and see may be shared with many others. Max Van Maanen concurs in his online essay “Facebook, Privacy and Online Intimacy”;

*[...] I am feeling that I am here with you. Within this binary sphere of intimacy between myself and the screen, you are addressing me, only you and only me (even though many others may be reading your*

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<sup>14</sup> Jeff Goodby, “Intimacy in the Age of Everything All At Once”, Fast Company, 02 October 2017, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3068094/intimacy-in-the-age-of-everything-all-at-once> [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Mateus, “Public Intimacy”, Sphera Publica, 10,(2010), 57-70 via Christina Miguel Martos, “The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites”, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/> , [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>16</sup> Noreen Malone, “Instagram's New Feature Shows How the Internet Is Embracing Intimacy” 12 December 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/115912/instagram-direct-and-new-era-online-intimacy> [Accessed 24 April 2018]

<sup>17</sup> Christina Miguel Martos, “The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites”, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/> , [Accessed 26 March 2018]

*writing and feel the intimacy I feel). But at the moment [...] I may not want to know of the presence of others.*<sup>18</sup>

If intimate interactions are taking place on a public social media site, there will be others observing, whether we acknowledge that or not. The knowledge that our interactions are being observed, will ultimately alter the actions and reactions of both participants,<sup>19</sup> making the intimacy cease to be genuine. This is why a public social media platform can never foster proper intimacy, as intimacy by definition is private.<sup>20</sup> It can, however, like the quote describes, foster the illusion of privacy.<sup>21</sup>

Facebook is a platform where we are both hyperaware and also pretending to be unaware of others observing our communication. The use of Facebook has changed our way of looking at personal relationships<sup>22</sup> to the point where being ‘Facebook official’<sup>23</sup> is one of the most important parts of validating them.<sup>24</sup> “Relationships are not private anymore, they

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<sup>18</sup> Max Van Maanen, “The Pedagogy of Momus Technologies: Facebook, Privacy, and Online Intimacy”, Qualitative Health Research, 24 March 2010, <http://www.maxvanmanen.com/files/2011/04/2010-MomusTechnologies.pdf> p.6, [Accessed 24 April 2018]

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Amidon, Raphael R. Kavanaugh, “The Observation of Intimacy in Groups”, Journal of Counselling and Development, 57 (1979) 464-468 (p.464)

<sup>20</sup> “Something of a personal or private nature” – “Definition of Intimacy”, Merriam-Webster Dictionaries, Date of Publication not Available, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intimacy> [Accessed 16 May 2018]

<sup>21</sup> Christina Miguel Martos, “The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites”, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/> [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>22</sup> Kushan Mitra, “Love in the Age of Social Media”, The Pioneer, 9 February 2014, <http://www.dailypioneer.com/sunday-edition/agenda/cover-story/love-in-the-age-of-social-media.html>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>23</sup> Having your relationship status on Facebook set to “In a relationship with [Partner’s Name]

<sup>24</sup> Wendy L. Patrick, “The Benefits of Going Facebook Official”, Psychology Today, 19 June 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-bad-looks-good/201706/the-relationship-benefits-going-facebook-official> [Accessed 24 April 2018]

have become increasingly public”<sup>25</sup>, for both partners, friends and family members. This can clearly be seen in birthday greetings and condolences, which are shared to people’s Facebook walls (i.e. public social media), as opposed to being given in person, or sent as messages through Facebook Messenger (i.e. “private” social media). The intimacy of a message is easily reduced by the fact that it can be seen by everyone, as this makes said message a means of gaining likes and comments, thus losing its original intention, which was to show compassion and build a connection.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the research I have done, I have also noticed a trend in my own life. An example that demonstrates this is a friend who said; “thank you so much for the birthday card, but can you please write it on my Facebook wall<sup>27</sup> too?” and friends who are loving and caring on public social media, but distant in real life.<sup>28</sup> Communicating online is efficient and visible to others, but does not create a safe, caring environment. Sometimes social media can be abused, and caring messages can be used for exposure instead of building intimacy. To answer a question proposed in the introduction of this essay; when we know our intimacy is public and visible to others, we might start using it as a means to appear kinder and better, to prove to others how happy we are in our relationships.

Danish photographer Marie Hyld has worked a lot with the concept of intimacy and explored this public/private divide in her art. She says that being intimate with someone, face to face, in a quiet room can be daunting and scary, and that “it takes vulnerability to create

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<sup>25</sup> Kushan Mitra, “Love in the Age of Social Media”, *The Pioneer*, 9 February 2014, <http://www.dailypioneer.com/sunday-edition/agenda/cover-story/love-in-the-age-of-social-media.html>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>26</sup> Edmund Amidon, Raphael R. Kavanaugh, “The Observation of Intimacy in Groups”, *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 57 (1979) 464-468 (p.464)

<sup>27</sup> The public page on your Facebook profile where everyone can post and see what has already been posted.

<sup>28</sup> MiKaylee Norris, “Social Media is Not Real Life – Splitting the seams between Fantasy and Real Life”, *Odyssey*, 22 March 2017, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/social-media-highlight-reel> [Accessed 14 May 2018]

intimacy,”<sup>29</sup> but that it is important to embrace this “analogue intimacy”<sup>30</sup>, no matter “how intimidating it might feel”.<sup>31</sup> In our world of constant motion, it might feel unnatural to stop and think, to simply be in the moment with someone. This might be an explanation for why a lot of people feel more comfortable with switching out analogue intimacy for online, “virtual intimacy”.<sup>32</sup> It is still moving, there are people seeing and reacting to it, and there is no silence following it.

Contemporary, virtual intimacy, can be found online through dating apps and web pages like Tindr, Grindr and Sugar. Martos talks about the “stigma around people who meet new people online, as they are considered not to be able to make friends offline,”<sup>33</sup> however, this does not seem to be the reality anymore. A lot of young people today actively use these sites as an additional platform in their search for a partner, instead of a replacement for meeting people in their everyday lives<sup>34</sup>. Online relationships start off with building trust

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<sup>29</sup> Lucy Yang, “A photographer pretended to be in love with strangers she just met — and the pictures say a lot about intimacy”, Insider Design, 22 February 2018, <http://www.thisisinsider.com/photos-couples-strangers-tinder-2018-2>, [Accessed 14 May 2018]

<sup>30</sup> Avery H Richards, “Intimacy in the Age of Virtuality”, Medium Psych, 2 January 2018, [https://medium.com/@averyhastings\\_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1](https://medium.com/@averyhastings_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1) [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>31</sup> Lucy Yang, “A photographer pretended to be in love with strangers she just met — and the pictures say a lot about intimacy”, Insider Design, 22 February 2018, <http://www.thisisinsider.com/photos-couples-strangers-tinder-2018-2>, [Accessed 14 May 2018]

<sup>32</sup> Avery H Richards, “Intimacy in the Age of Virtuality”, Medium Psych, 2 January 2018, [https://medium.com/@averyhastings\\_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1](https://medium.com/@averyhastings_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1) [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>33</sup> Christina Miguel Martos, “The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites”, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/>, [Accessed 26 March 2018],

<sup>34</sup> Isabel Thottam, “Do Young People Really Use Online Dating?”, eHarmony, Date of Publication not Available, <https://www.eharmony.com/young-people-use-online-dating/> [Accessed 26 March 2018]

through virtual intimacy, meaning that they are built on Martos' "illusion of intimacy"<sup>35</sup>.

Like Avery H. Richards said;

*like airplanes [want to be real birds], the virtual relationships and intimacy we experience with others through the internet wants to be real intimacy, it wants to become invisible, for us to experience its platform as reality itself.*<sup>36</sup>

In our modern day lives, many want to believe that this virtual intimacy is real, as it is quick and easily accessible.

However, with all this research in mind, I do believe that using "private" social media messaging and networking sites like Skype, Messenger and FaceTime can help build and maintain intimacy with people far away. This is however, in instances where the intimacy and connection has already been established in face to face situations, and where the connection might otherwise have been lost because of distance. I also believe this to be a healthy option, only if both parties communicating are aware and conscious that the intimacy they are experiencing is an illusion. If both parties are aware of the illusion of intimacy, then the results of virtual intimacy will not be any less valuable.

Personally, as an international student, I am an avid user of "private" social media sites. During term time, I am away from my family, and during breaks, I am away from my

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<sup>35</sup> Christina Miguel Martos, "The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites", Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/> [Accessed 26 March 2018]

<sup>36</sup> Avery H Richards, "Intimacy in the Age of Virtuality", Medium Psych, 2 January 2018, [https://medium.com/@averyhastings\\_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1](https://medium.com/@averyhastings_98108/intimacy-in-the-age-of-virtuality-ef14d8330ad1) [Accessed 26 March 2018]



partner who resides in England. This means that I am always missing someone, there is always someone I am unable to be close to, and social media is a helpful tool to bridge that gap.

In the first semester of my first year at the University of Winchester, I called my sister on skype in the middle of the night. I felt sad and homesick and the world was too heavy, so we chatted for hours, before we both fell asleep with our cameras still on, listening to the other person's breathing, feeling like we were just a bit closer to each other than we actually were. As this was a person I had a very familial intimate relationship with, this virtual intimacy felt just as valid as analogue intimacy, and it made me feel safe, providing me with the same result that analogue intimacy provides.

When I am in Norway, Skype also helps my partner and I maintain intimacy in our relationship, as we can comfort each other when need be and hear each other's voices, on our respective sides of the pond. We share fears, thoughts and worries, and even though a video of your loved one's face cannot replace the experience of being close to them and holding them, it is a lot better than the alternative, which is to not see them at all. These are therefore instances where we consciously use the illusion of intimacy<sup>37</sup> to our advantage.

To conclude this essay, I do not believe that using social media platforms and networking sites has made us completely incapable of forming and maintaining intimacy in

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<sup>37</sup> Christina Miguel Martos, "The Transformation of Intimacy and Privacy through Social Networking Sites", Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, 28 May 2016, <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2158/>, [Accessed 26 March 2018]

our relationships. However, by using public social media pages instead of meeting up in private, we might sacrifice intimacy for efficiency, as we switch out private conversations with publically exposed love letters. As our intimacy at this point is observed by other users of the network, the messages become about showing off our relationships, rather than building intimacy with our partner. Nonetheless, in this busy, online world, we also need analogue intimacy more than ever. In search for this, we have learned to adapt and treat virtual intimacy as a tool in addition to analogue intimacy, not a replacement. Ultimately, if we manage to distinguish between intimacy and the illusion of intimacy, gaining the same feeling of safety from both, then private social media platforms have not stopped us from being able to be intimate with each other, in fact, if they enable us to keep our intimate connections across distances, thwarting circumstances that in another time made it impossible to maintain intimacy with our loved ones.

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